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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issues concerning latchkey children in the United States and the need for parents, schools, and communities to support special programs for these children. It is emphasized that although these children have received increased attention, research findings have not conclusively shown what types of programs will best meet the needs of the latchkey situation. Research has shown, however, that each community must develop a program that responds to local problems and is tailored to local needs. Future research on latchkey children should examine the environment in which children live and the attributes that affect their personal and social development. Preliminary research has indicated that latchkey children under self-care face many risks, including negative feeling, insecurity, accidents, abuse, neglect, and fear. Also discussed is the responsibility of parents and of communities to find a solution to the dilemma of the nation's latchkey children, particularly in terms of supporting school-sponsored after-school care programs and community-sponsored family day-care programs. (DST)

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WHAT RESEARCH HAS TO SAY ABOUT LATCHKEY PROGRAMS

by

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During the past forty years profound changes have taken place in American society which have had a significant impact on families and children. There have been two changes of greatest importance. Fifty-three percent of all children under the age of eighteen have mothers who work either full or part-time, and sixty-two percent of such children living in single parent household headed by women in the workforce. The pace of these changes accelerated during the 1970's. Recent labor force and employment status figures project that the school age population of children between the ages of five and thirteen will rise from thirty million in 1980 to thirty-five million by the year 2000 and that seventy-five percent of all women will be employed. By most estimates there are at least six million children between the ages of five and fourteen across the nation who are without direct adult supervision for significant periods of time on a regular basis.

As economic and social pressures cause more women to work outside the home, the latchkey child phenomenon will increase. These children have traditionally been described as those who carry their own door key to lock the house as they leave for school in the morning and/ or let themselves into an empty house at the end of the

school day. The latchkey child phenomenon has been a topic of concern since a large number of unsupervised children became visible during World War II as a larger number of mothers worked in war plants.

Increased attention has been focused on such children, but research studies in this area are still in their infancy. However, research has shown that the need for child-care and support services for latchkey children under self-care face many risks: negative feeling, insecurity, accidents, abuse, neglect and fear. Few studies have been done on the effect of adult supervision versus its lack on the development and school performance of latchkey children. The data suggest that children with continuous adult supervision have fewer developmental problems than those left under their own care. It is obvious that schools, parents and the communities must address the special program needs of latchkey children. There is a need to know the types and basis of latchkey programs, the situation concerning the passage of latchkey legislation in the United States and the status of current research.

According to Rooney (1983), the term "latchkey" is an Eighteenth Century one used to describe the tool used to lift the latch on a door. Children who wear

door keys around their necks have been traditionally called "latchkey children." These children are cared for under the latchkey arrangement.

Present licensing of childcare facilities is primarily for preschool ages, according to Rooney (1983). The Federal standards for child care services were eliminated in 1981 by the Reagan Administration. The states now set their own standards and enforcement policies. The same source claimed that the new standards imposed by the states are deficient or restricted in their applications.

Long (1983) found that many parents using the latchkey arrangement slip into self-care by default. Parents find that work demands came before continuous adult supervision of their children can be arranged. They cannot find available or affordable adult-care spaces. Their children resist attending child-care programs that are not age appropriate. Parents then begin with self-care on an occasional basis. Nothing untowards happens, the children are able to cope, and soon the children are averaging two and half hours of self-care per day. Most single parents, for may reasons, but economic ones in particular, who need alternative child care go into the latchkey arrangement

on the first day of employment. This arrangement, be it for children from two-parent homes or single-parent homes, crosses all social, racial and economic groups.

As latchkey children grow at an alarming pace, critical issues for parents, children and child-care professionals begin to emerge, according to Stroman and Duff (1982). A persisting concern among some individuals related the effect of the latchkey situation on the children involved. Garbarino (1981) and Long and Long (1982) found that some of these children feel rejected, but the number is not known. Some are more prone than others towards delinquent behavior (Child Welfare, 1982). But, again, the number is unknown. Nor do we really know if they do worse in school. Quality research is greatly needed in these areas. Banducci (1967) found that in terms of educational aspirations, expectation, and achievement, the full-time employment of mothers had little, if any, detrimental effect on their children. For lower socio-economic families, children of working mothers generally earned higher grades than children of nonworking mothers. The findings appeared to indicate a trend rather than a cause and effect relationship. On the other hand, the data seemed to indicate that

unsupervised children are more likely to be victims of accidents and sexual attacks by siblings and nonparental adults, Garbarino (1981). According to Long and Long (1983) the most serious problems the latchkey child face are psychological. The children lock themselves in closets or hide under beds until parents or an adult return home. In the absence of adults and friends, these children are fearful and develop an overwhelming sense of aloneness. The latchkey arrangement discourages social interaction between peers, as these children are restricted to their homes. The profile of latchkey children shows that they neither do more chores nor watch more television than their peers, but often show great responsibility in taking care of brothers and sisters (Instructor, May 1982). It is the premature burden of responsibility, when it occurs in a negative emotional climate, that seems to be damaging to these children. However, Long and Long (1983), Garbarino (1981) and Stroman and Duff (1982) agree that the evidence regarding the welfare of latchkey children is insufficient to point to clearcut negative or positive consequences. However, Long (1983) argues that for the older child the responsibility of being on one's own before and after school is an opportunity rather than a

negative influence.

We know that the social climate of a family has a great deal to do with how its members cope with the stresses of life. Where the parent is uncomfortable with leaving a child alone or in the care of older children, the hours of nonsupervision by an adult can be fraught with worry. Stress in itself is destructive, and caring parents, at best, are uneasy in leaving children unsupervised.

What can be done to help? Long and Long (1985), as well as most concerned social agencies, feel that business and community leaders must find a solution to the dilemma of the nation's latchkey children. Employers should consider more flexible working hours for parents and be a source of information about child-care services. There has been an absence at all levels of organized effort in addressing the plight of latchkey children and their parents. Reports of isolated efforts to organize programs for them are scanty, at best, when compared to the need.

The answers to the latchkey problem will vary with the child, the family and the community. But the problem must be addressed by parents and the greater community as well. All must be willing to ensure that

care is provided for children left in self-care by parents who are forced into the latchkey experience by social and economic pressures (Childhood Educator, December 1982).

The home alone child is national in scope and Stewart (1981), in her review of literature, found that it is international in scope as well. The need for after-school care for children is universal. But, as Stewart (1981) found in her study, no country provides adequate space or even has data indicating where school-age children are being cared for.

As parent awareness develops, both as to the number of latchkey children in society and the possible negative consequences attached to this arrangement, more parents will seek child-care programs. There are many school-sponsored after-school care programs as well as community-sponsored family day-care programs, (Childhood Educator, December 1982).

Dali (1982) believes that care outside of the home could offer, or give, latchkey children opportunities for cognitive growth that many parents may not be able to provide. It is further noted by Dali (1982) that there is little or no information on how school-age child-care allows parents to pursue

career goals and ways in which outside care would affect the family.

Because more and more children are experiencing the latchkey way of life, and more attention is given to the issue, Strother (1984) found that there is now some competition over who "owns" the latchkey children issue. Day-care specialists advocate establishment of school-based child-care programs from available resources. These high-quality child-care programs would be open to all families who need them. Child welfare and child abuse prevention organizations believe that curricula devoted to survival skills better prepare children to take care of themselves. Such curricula seem to condone self-care for children. Strother (1984) further noted that feminists have also become involved in the issue. They believe that a choice of child-care arrangement should be made available to working parents who cannot otherwise afford them. Strother (1984) adds that researchers have also entered the debate and in some cases the researchers are using inadequate data which confuses the issue.

Long and Long (1982) notes that a major task is getting parents to see that after-school programs may be a solution to their problem. But until a particular

program gains a reputation for excellence, parents are hesitant about embracing a single program.

According to Stickney (1981) the reasons for operating child-care programs are as diverse as the programs themselves. His research found that some programs are custodial. They keep children off the streets. Some prepare children for school, while others supplement school experiences. Many are babysitting services so that parents can work. Some are remedial, and others are "child development" centers (which Stickney (1981) supports). The objectives of a "Latch Key Development" program are to provide children with an opportunity to engage in activities which benefit them emotionally, physically and educationally. However, Stickney's program seems to overlook such emergencies as children who may be ill, parents who may be working overtime and days when there is no school.

Cramer and others (1977) advocate the establishment of afterschool "Latch Key" programs that utilize tax-supported schools to meet the needs of all age groups in the community. Many advocates feel that successful programs have survived because they have met the needs of a changing society. There is no single or "one right" program for communities to establish.

More often than not, the same children who must spend portions of every day without adult-care during the school year must also spend even larger segments of time alone during summer vacations and holidays. Research has shown that there are risks for latchkey children and especially for children in urban areas. The latchkey situation is a social problem, and national attitudes toward latchkey children must go beyond addressing these risks. Parents need not be reminded of these risks, as they already feel guilty and worried about self-care arrangements.

The findings are inconclusive as to the type of programs that will meet the needs of the latchkey situation. Research has shown that each community must develop a program that responds to local problems and tailored to local needs.

Further research on latchkey children should be directed at examining the environment in which they live and what attributes affect the latchkey child's personal and social development. There is a need for quantitative research. A review of literature has revealed a great deal of concern about the lack of enough school-age child care centers and the lack of affordable school-age child care programs. Federal

agencies have given the legal task to the state agencies to lay the groundwork for school-age child-care programs. The financial outlook for funding latchkey programs is not as good, as the main sources for funds are parents and the private sector. Communities must support efforts to obtain federal funds to help fill the growing gap in the life of children under self-care. Society must do something to make employment and parental responsibilities fit together better and ensure that affordable high-quality, child-care programs are made available to all in need.

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